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February 27, 2024

The Honorable Senator David Wilson
Chair, Senate Health & Social Services Committee
State Capitol, Room 121
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Electronic Letter

RE: Providence Alaska Supports Senate Bill 240 SCHOOL DISTRICT MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Dear Senator Wilson,

Providence Alaska has set the standard for modern health care in Alaska for more than 100 years. Today we remain the state's largest health care and behavioral health provider, and the largest private employer, with nearly 5,000 caregivers across Alaska. As the chief executive for Providence Alaska, I write in strong support for SB 240 and to reducing barriers for adolescent mental health services.

According to the Alaska Vital Statistics 2021 annual report, suicide is the leading cause of death for Alaskan youth ages 15-24. One out of every five Alaska high school students will attempt suicide. At Providence, we are seeing younger and younger patients who are experiencing severe mental health crisis. These statistics should cause us all to immediately pause and pledge to do better for our young people.

A vital component of supporting our communities, our families, and Alaska youth is to invest upstream and providing mental health services in schools. Providence Alaska has long partnered to provide mental health services in the Anchorage and Kodiak Island Borough School Districts. Together with VOA, we currently provide school-based clinicians in 18 schools during the 2023/2024 school year. School-based services provide early identification and intervention for students who are struggling with mental health needs and is proven to improve academic performance and school climate and safety.

The Kodiak Island Borough School District has three full-time Providence mental health clinicians onsite at the middle and high schools in the City of Kodiak. These are Providence caregivers, not schools district employees, supervised by the Providence counseling center and regional behavioral health program. They are also partners with the teaching staff and community to provide adolescent trauma-informed care. While providing this care, Kodiak went a decade without an adolescent

suicide. Investing in our youth works and well-funded mental health services create the opportunity for students to thrive.

Alaska lacks sustainable funding mechanisms to increase integrated mental health programs in schools. State law limits the Department of Health's ability to bill for Medicaid-eligible services. This legislation would allow for Medicaid reimbursement for school-based services and would eliminate the requirement that students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

I urge your strong support of SB 240 and appreciate the leadership of Governor Dunleavy for introducing the legislation to support mental health care in our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ella Goss".

Ella Goss, MSN, RN
Chief Executive
Providence Alaska